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Architecture, aesthetics and making a working countryside. DRAFT

EAAE Rurality Network. Fribourg 2013.

John Brennan : University of Edinburgh

This paper researches two rural contexts, in Scotland and Norway where, there is a real movement, often politically inspired to highlight shared cultural experience and cross border co-operation and exchange. We look at these two contexts in terms of identifying relationships between architecture and rural regeneration. Too often, rural design is constructed around vernacular typologies either to embrace or ignore traditional building practice. Instead the social underpinnings of the countryside are explored to highlight difference between two different land use traditions and to identify common challenges for contemporary rural design practice. We look at the Scots and Norwegian contexts and explore how in both contexts, significant issues present themselves that require new ways of designing in the countryside. These are then articulated into two starting points for a design process – that of ‘loose’ and ‘long limbed’ settlements.

A critical starting point in defining the rural is to perceive it less as an urban opposition but on its own terms. In the UK, the Industrial Revolution is seen as an urban phenomenon, although its country cousin in the guise of agricultural Improvement was no less radical in its reshaping of the social and economic underpinnings of architectural form¹. The very terminology implicit in the upheavals of urban economic revolution is set against an implied gentility of a concurrent rural ‘Improvement’. It reinforces respective stereotypes and affirms Gallent’s² assertion of the UK possessing a divisive urban-rural culture. The Scots experience of both voluntary and forced migration in the eighteenth century demonstrates a very different relationship between the building and landscape to those nations that industrialised in a more sedate manner.

Difficulties encountered in defining the term rural reflect its contested nature. Christian Bengs very succinctly charts a path from straightforward categorisations of settlement size and physical characteristics to a point where the very existence of the rural was challenged. Unsurprisingly, contemporary perspectives involve simultaneous readings of the countryside as a series of contested social and spatial constructs³. For architecture,

at the heart of any attempt to define the rural must be a notion of landscape. An interpretation of landscape can be scenic and purely phenomenal set within a language of undisturbed nature and the idealised vista. In contrast, it has been recast by Olwig as *Landschaft*, an integral part of political and social discourse⁴. Similarly, the rural can be expressed simultaneously as possessing, according to Christos Zografos, contradictory qualities, of utilitarianism and hedonism⁵. In a utilitarian sense, the rural is an agglomeration of assets solely to generate wealth. The business of agriculture is pre-eminent in this vision, but also encompasses the perhaps aptly styled tourist industries. In this paradigm, the subjective qualities of landscape are made measurable and commodified. A pertinent example lies in the low cultural value assigned to farm buildings in Scotland, that manifests itself in an architecture of almost perverse functionality. [fig.1] . In this case the countryside is purveyor of pleasure, where qualities of seclusion and expansiveness are much sought after as a foil to an otherwise chaotic urban lifestyle [fig. 2].



fig 1: Perverse Functionality: Preston Steading. Scottish Borders



(Fig. 2) *Skyspace Perthshire. An emphatic example of rural hedonism.*

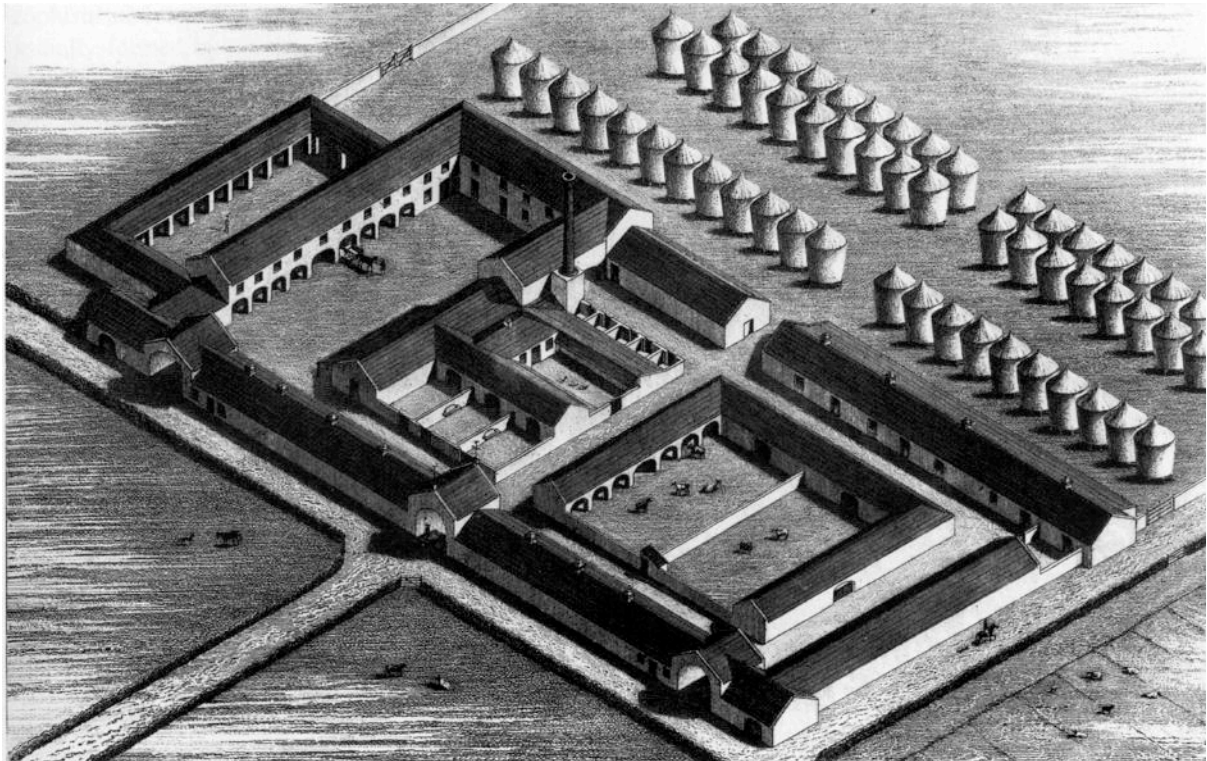
The Scots experience: a culture of 'Improvement'

Traditional settlement patterns in rural Scotland were often based around loose 'fermtoun' groupings. The transformation of the land known as 'Agricultural Improvement' led to mass migration, much of it involuntary, in the Seventeenth Century. 'Model' steadings and villages, rectilinear in layout, quasi scientific in conception, circumscribed in boundary and edge became a dominant rural form. From a complex interwoven relationship between building, agriculture and landscape, there quickly evolved a coarser, less nuanced model.

Land was re-ordered to maximize financial return through the employment of Enlightenment scientific method. Architectural response within this environment followed Zografos' paths of either hedonism or utilitarianism. In the Nineteenth Century, as many Highland upland areas were given over to sporting activity, the architecture of agriculture in specific cases sought to reinforce a notion of the countryside as a romanticised playground with the deliberate deployment of style to accentuate any chosen landscape idyll.

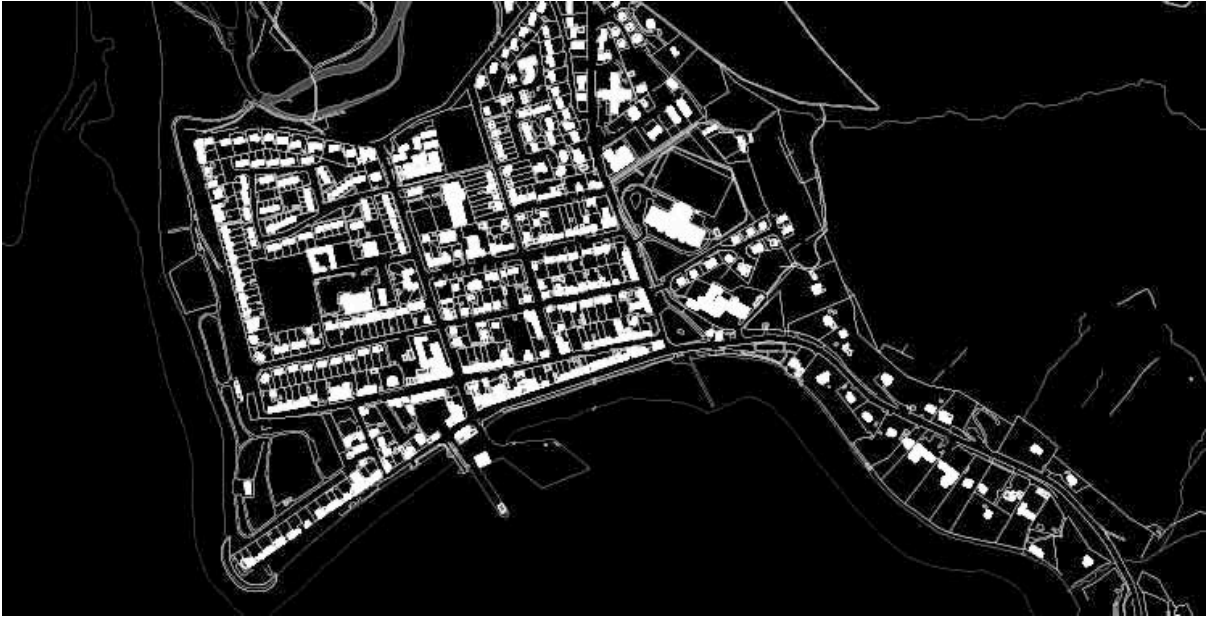
Concurrent with such well-mannered architectural hedonism was a ubiquitous architecture based immersed in Enlightenment method and reason that effectively

erased much of the traditional and the vernacular from the Scottish countryside. Farm clusters were 'developed to perfection' by specialist farm architects⁶. Although their composition and materiality suggest a craft sensibility to their construction, apart from some consideration to symmetry these were functional constructs using locally available skills, building materials and cheap labour⁷.



(Fig. 3) *Isometric View of proposals for a mixed farm at Swanston, Midlothian c. 1850. Architect: James Newlands.*

Thus, in parallel with the hedonistic, the land was also ostensibly a utilitarian asset, to be worked hard in pursuit of an economic return. At a settlement scale, especially in the Highlands, the compact, defined, nucleated village was similarly a product of an elite hunger for Improvement. During the eighteenth century it is thought that 500 new planned settlements were built in Scotland, of which nearly 200 were in the sparsely populated Highland and northeast regions⁸.



(Fig. 4) The Improved Village. Although rigorously planned, as a framework, the town of Ullapool is weak in its ability to accommodate expansionary pressures to the North and South of the original centre.

The Victorian era saw rural Scotland now emptied of people, replenished in myth. A shared vision of an idealised, ‘unspoilt’ landscape was held dear by both rich and poor. These prevailing perceptions still hold sway in the way in which rural development is held in suspicion⁹.

In a contemporary context, such nostalgia is heavily pressured by the realities of migration within a densely populated nation. The scale of this can be sensed in the predominantly rural counties of Perth and Kinross where population is predicted to rise by 28% over 25 years¹⁰. What causes this is well documented; an erosion of household size, retirement migration and the emergence of the long distance commuter. In confronting such tensions, the countryside cultivates a political abrasiveness. According to Shucksmith, development policies have at their heart, a presumption against building outwith well-defined settlements, and indeed he remarks that:

‘planning controls have therefore become- in effect if not intent- instruments of social exclusivity¹¹,

Such a view is entirely symptomatic of a prevailing intuition amongst social scientists that the Scots countryside has always been host to a divisive rural culture.

Norway: complexity and evolution

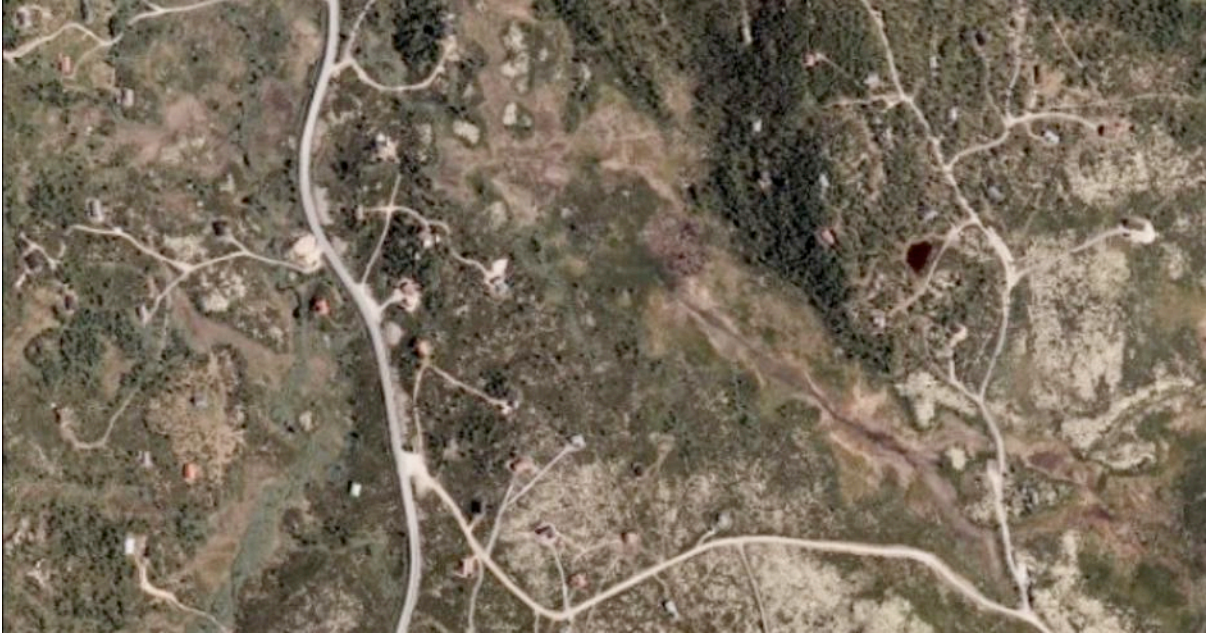
The rural experience in Norway is very different to that encountered in Scotland. A preliminary examination finds more intensive and diverse agricultures, a greater incidence of non-urban manufacturing and industrial development underpinned by a pervasive policy of regional support. Referred to as a 'cohesive' culture by Gallent¹² these rural environments continue to exercise cultural and political influence beyond utilitarian measures of economic value. Although modern Norway has been able to exploit and profit from bountiful resources of hydroelectricity and oil, its rural diversity predates their exploitation. The essence of Norwegian countryside lies in land rights. There is little tradition of large landed estates, indeed, by 1835, 70% of all farmers owned their land in an intense patchwork of smallholdings¹³. Settlements consequently developed incrementally through a gradual consensus. Mass migration overseas in the 19th and 20th centuries was experienced in a manner similar to Scotland, but demographic change was less abrupt, even with instances of rural re-population especially to the Nordland and Finnmark regions¹⁴. Settlements derived from 'clusteryards' close to farming plots. Traces of this spatial framework remain, despite varying degrees of land consolidation¹⁵. It is in this context that Allemannsratten is embedded whereby a diverse base of land ownership fosters co-operative communities that militate against a clearly demarcated exclusivity in the land.

Rural building is overwhelmingly detached, often loosely clustered along arterial routes. Nearly all are timber clad regardless of location or regional variance¹⁶. Although the disposition of buildings, even within urban areas, often seems chaotic, there is often an evident conformity to shared architectural grammars that communicates some order to the rural landscape. This is perhaps most evident in the widespread use of red oxide to cladding outside towns and the careful massing and finishing of agricultural buildings.



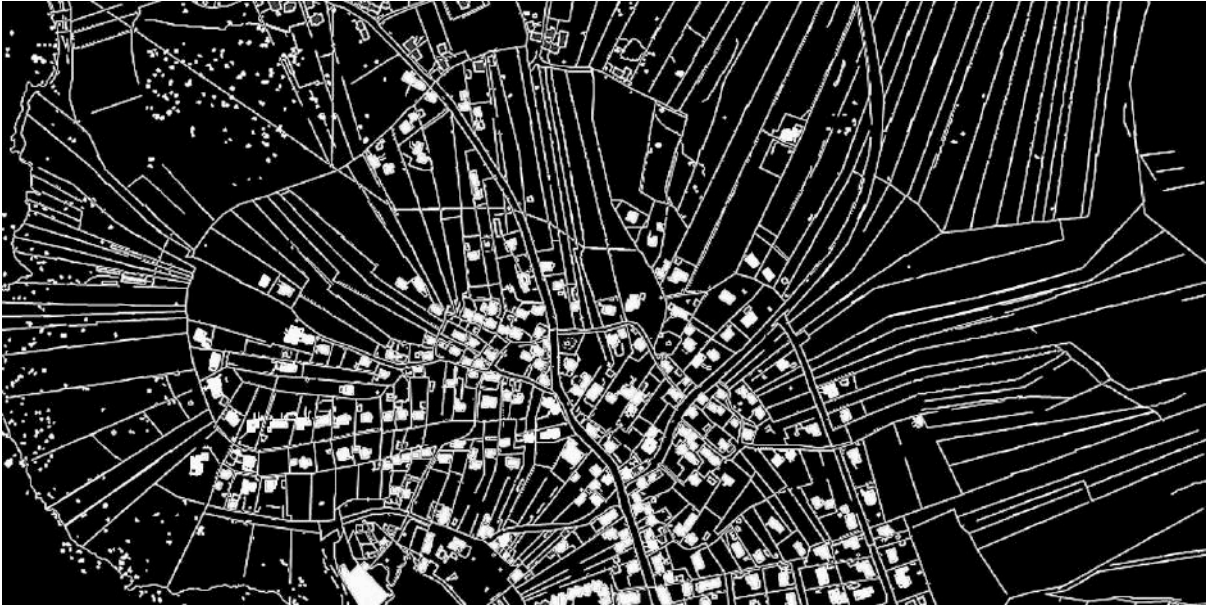
(Fig. 5) Village Cluster, Sigerfjord, Stortland, Norway.

In Norway, a dispersed model of land ownership has brought about an intricate weave of building and landscape. Although Norwegian topography and climate are famously challenging, most landscape vistas except in the most inhospitable locations, contain established and well-rooted settlements. The fjord defines external perceptions of the Norwegian landscape, but much of the interior consists of undulating uplands at altitudes often in excess of 1000m. Traditionally, such land was used for the short summer grazing of animals but is now substituted with recreational activity. It comes as an unexpected surprise to experience a patchwork of path and cabin that provokes a disorientating juxtaposition of building and terrain in what is usually experienced as a wilderness landscape. The continuing role of the recreational 'hytte' acts as much as a reconnection of the urbanite to still felt pastoral values¹⁷.



(Fig. 6) Sporadic Hytte development. Uvdalsåi.

The south coast of Norway has started to experience development pressures similar to that in Scotland. A fine grain of land ownership often results in a defined village centre with provision for chance encountered and social interaction. As a result, development pressure in some communities such as the township of Borhaug is actually to engender cohesion through the formation of a better defined village centre. Part of an ongoing study by Gaia Architects Norway has sought to address and accommodate the needs of both existing and incoming communities. The architects' key strategy is to develop and regenerate the harbour area partly on ground formerly occupied by the shipyards [Fig. 6]. A key proposal is then to establish a village centre based around retail and that such a communal hub will generate tourism development.



(Fig. 7) The loose village: Borhaug. The settlement pattern is governed by a fine grain of land ownership.

The need to make provision for inward migration in areas such as Farsund Commune exposes in sharp relief some of the shortcomings of the Norwegian rural model to respond to an affluent and more mobile society. Paradoxically, the more rigid nucleated Scottish model deals more effectively with the formation of a communal centre independent of the household. Although the ownership patterns of the two countries have no similarities, the Norwegian rural model has much that can be assimilated elsewhere in the way that settlements and the design of buildings within them are inherently flexible.

It would presume much to suggest any clear relationships between pre clearance housing patterns in Scotland and the rural tradition in Norway¹⁸. However as a literal foundation on which contemporary Norwegian rural settlements have been made, a dispersed planning typology does not detract from any visual landscape amenity. Pre industrial housing patterns in Scotland exhibit some of this fluidity and we should question whether entrenched assumptions of protecting the 'unspoilt' or 'natural landscape' has any pre-eminence over those structures that preceded it.

So what might we learn?

Although there is an undoubted cultural and political encouragement to learn from the Norwegian experience, little would survive any direct transplantation to different contexts.

Buildings can have a proactive role in rural regeneration but only through a reappraisal of what we require from them.

In a Scots context, state sponsored transplantations of large scale industrial muscle to the Highlands has been largely unsuccessful¹⁹. In the wake of such failed ventures as Corpach and Invergordon, less monolithic strategies for rural areas have been pursued. The advent of more flexible working, in part brought on by near universal broadband provision and improvements in transportation brings with it implicit demands on rural housing stock. In Scotland, industrialisation and a division of labour in both urban and rural environments means that rural settlements are often planned tightly with little room for adaptation. The Norwegian model of small townships, ribbon development and generous plot sizes, irrespective of income accommodates a multitude of different activities. New housing stock produced in rural areas demonstrates little flexibility in the way of design or siting that can allow for more responsive employment structures. [fig.]

The influx of the 'remote knowledge worker' has both economic and social benefits as opposed to the previously dominant migrations of retired and second homeowners. Current census data suggests in well-connected rural areas that 25% [as opposed to a national average of around 5%] of the workforce is home based²⁰. The Taylor Review²¹ sees opportunity, not only in home working but the positioning of small businesses as critical to rural regeneration. Some commentators have made positive linkages between sprawl and rural development, this is paradoxical, in respect that many Norwegian commentators look to the UK as an exemplar²². In East Anglia, youth migration has been balanced by an influx of the 'established young'. This cohort seeks a hedonistic rural milieu, of open space and recreational opportunity, along with a clean environment²³. In return according to Barstad, are attendant increases in employment and economic development. To date, the housing need of such migrations have been accommodated through existing housing stock and conversions albeit distorting the market and precipitating a 'spatial exclusion'²⁴ of indigenous lower income groups. Land re-distribution or ownership reform has limited application in free market economies. We can therefore suggest that new rural housing typologies in themselves are critical in transforming and sustaining an economically active countryside.

A challenge lies in how these issues can be marshalled into coherent architectural design strategies. We propose two means by which development can be reconsidered both building, neighbourhood and village scales.

Loose

Looseness is a term that can be associated with Stuart Brand's work around *How Buildings Learn*²⁵ in which long term adaptability and value depends on straightforward, simply designed, generous spaces. Such sentiments were also articulated by Gordon Graham in 1972 who with a certain amount of foresight referred to anticipatory design as being 'long life, loose fit'²⁶

Pre Improvement settlements in Scots contexts are referred to 'Fermtouns', or 'Bailteans. They were underpinned by a subsistence agriculture based on infield and outfield cultivation. Robert Dodgshon comments on a prevailing view of their 'archaic and deeply conservative form' that accords with a contemporary view of the rural as stubbornly pre-modern, static and unresponsive to external forces of change and improvement.

Dodgshon instead describes the Bailteans as flexible and fluid in their construction and form making. Many Bailtean buildings were built of timber frame and turf, where a scarcity of timber meant that occupants would routinely move with their timber doors roofs and floors²⁷. Such buildings were thus defined by 'process rather than structure' with 'regular cycles of destruction and renewal'²⁸. Such a pre-modern urban pattern in rural Scotland can be seen as a modernising construct especially in its clear demarcation of boundary between land and building.



(Fig. 8) North Bragar, Lewis. Non improved farmland showing croft parcels.

For an architectural response to be proactive in engendering vigorous rural communities, then the need for building typologies to be adaptable and extendable within a loose site context is important. The ubiquity of smallholdings in the Norwegian rural economy meant a far closer relationship between dwelling and agricultural building. Arne Berg researched rural settlements in North Norway, documenting Klyngetun where in various configurations; byres and sheds were closely integrated with dwelling units²⁹. Many small Norwegian settlements still retain farm buildings at their core. Similarly in Southern Norway, a tradition of Gangway houses still survives³⁰. These long linear forms join house and agricultural accommodation, that has proved to be flexible in adapting to new uses. The building form is less dispersed than other tun formations, in part to provide shelter in exposed coastal areas.

Long Limbed

Long Limbed is a term we might use to describe growth as a linear rather than radial process. At the settlement scale we see in both Scots and Norwegian contexts, development along route with dispersed communities, but critically with the space and opportunity to construct adaptable, flexible households that are economically as well as socially significant.



(Fig. 9) Bragar, Lewis. Linear, dispersed development, with primary route and secondary, parallel residential feeder.

At the scale of household, long limbed housing plots with elongated, narrow proportions encourage a range of uses and the construction of workplace both enclosed and unenclosed.

At the scale of the home, a long-limbed design typology is one where delineations of living and working are deliberately blurred to accommodate the ebb and flow of the household and workplace.

The dispersed nature of Norwegian rural settlements either through sporadic development or in village clusters allows for housing to extend and also accommodate business uses on site. A useful area of enquiry is therefore to examine the nature of ribbon development along arterial roads and how this can be integrated usefully within other European contexts where such a typology is rare.

Conclusion

We have endeavoured to explore two very different rural traditions. There are fundamental differences in the structure of land ownership that have ensured the forging of two divergent national narratives. Some fundamental commonalities however resonate, perhaps embodied in the inherent flexibility of many Norwegian settlements with the pre-Clearance Bailtean. The perceived divisive nature of the Scots rural

condition seems to focus almost exclusively on very real inequalities in access to housing. This is perhaps to the detriment of engaging with other migration patterns, where the centralised monolithic workplace becomes increasingly obsolete. An ideal for many lies in an opportunity to work within Zografos' hedonistic readings of rural environments. Existing building stock cannot accommodate anticipated population growth in many rural areas, therefore we need to look to new models that can engage with more diffuse ways in which wealth is created. In this sense the fundamental qualities of the **loose** and **long limbed** as validated by the Norwegian experience should inform contemporary debates as to what makes a relevant rural architecture.

¹ T. M. Devine, *Clearance and Improvement : Land, Power and People in Scotland, 1700-1900* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2006), p. 144

² Nick Gallent, Mark Shucksmith, and Mark Tewdwr-Jones, *Housing in the European Countryside : Rural Pressure and Policy in Western Europe*, Housing, Planning and Design Series (London: Routledge, 2003). p.144

³ Christer Bengs, 'Urban-Rural Relations in Europe', in ESPON, ed. by Christer Bengs and Kaiser Schmidt-Thomé (Helsinki: Centre for Urban and Regional Studies. Helsinki University of Technology, 2004). p.15

⁴ Kenneth R. Olwig, 'Recovering the Substantive Nature of Landscape', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 86 (1996), 630-53. This paper provides an overview of landscape through a historical perspective with a degree of hostility to its 'disciplinary de-materialisation'.

⁵ Christos Zografos, 'Rurality Discourses and the Role of the Social Enterprise in Regenerating Rural Scotland', *Journal of Rural Studies* (2007), 38-51.

⁶ John Martin Robinson, 'Model Farm Buildings of the Age of Improvement', *Architectural History*, 19 (1976), 17-22. p.21

⁷ Liz Whitfield, and Historic Scotland. Technical Conservation Research and Education Division., *Rural Buildings of the Lothians : Conservation and Conversion*, Historic Scotland Guide for Practitioners ; 1 (Edinburgh: Historic Scotland, 2000), p.12

⁸ 16 Daniel Maudlin, 'Robert Mylne, Thomas Telford and the Architecture of Improvement: The Planned Villages of the British Fisheries Society, 1786-1817', *Urban History*, 34 (2007), 453-80. p.454

⁹ The use of public narrative to mould public perceptions has been explored in a rural context in: John Brennan, 'The Use of Narrative in Contemporary Rural Architecture', *ARQ*, 10 (2006), 12-23.

¹⁰ General Register Office (Scotland), 'Population Projections Scotland', in population projections by sex, age and administrative area (Edinburgh: General Register for Scotland Office, 2008)

¹¹ Mark Shucksmith, and Ed Conway, quoting Newby (1985) 'Scotland', in *Housing in the European Countryside : Rural Pressure and Policy in Western Europe*, ed. by Nick Gallent, Mark Shucksmith and Mark Tewdwr-Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), p.170

¹² Nick Gallent, Mark Shucksmith, and Mark Tewdwr-Jones, *Housing in the European Countryside : Rural Pressure and Policy in Western Europe*, Housing, Planning and Design Series (London: Routledge, 2003), p.11

¹³ Kåre Lunden, 'Recession and the New Expansion 1350 - 1814', in Norwegian Agricultural History, ed. by Reidar Ålmas (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2004). p. 197

¹⁴ Ottar Brox, The Political Economy of Rural Development. ed. by John Bryden and Robert Storey (Delft: Eburon, 2006).

¹⁵ Brynjuluv Gjerdåker, Kåre Lunden, Bjørn Myhre, and Ingvild Øye, Norwegian Agricultural History. ed. by Reidar Ålmas (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2004).

¹⁶ An excellent reference that encompasses both traditional and modern dwelling types is Arvid Petterson, Hus i Finnmark (Vadsø: Fortidsminneforeningen. Finnmark avdeling, 2005). Dealing with architecture in Finnmark it covers post-war rebuilding in the wake of the German army's policy of scorched earth. It therefore is able to compare quite clearly differences in traditional and reconstructed housing clusters.

¹⁷ A key reference is Chris Butters, Anne Mette Raaholt, and Kim Skaara, Hytter Og Miljø : 39 Eksempler På Fritidsbebyggelse (Oslo: KommuneForl., 2006). This publication is sympathetic towards sporadic development despite a tacit admission of increased environmental impact in comparison to denser building clusters. There is latitude in the degree of stylistic expression in the building of the hutte, but tempered by the fostering of a community responsibility not to detract from the landscape qualities of the area. This careful construct of a balance between individual freedoms and community responsibility is very specific to the Norwegian experience, steeped in the Allemannsratten tradition

¹⁸ Robert Dodgshon, 'West Highland and Hebridean Settlement Prior to Crofting and the Clearances: A Study into Stability or Change?', Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 123 (1993), p. 421.

¹⁹ Key examples would be aluminium production at Invergordon and Fort William and paper production at Corpach. Successful industrial investment has been predominantly in the energy sector, specifically hydro-electricity and latterly oil.

²⁰²⁰ General Register Office for Scotland, 'Scotland's Census Results Online - Employment Statistics for Area 60rb000812 [Pitlochry] (2008) <<http://www.scrol.gov.uk/scrol/common/home.jsp>> [Accessed 10.08.08 2008].

²¹ M Taylor, 'Living Working Countryside', (London: Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008).

²² Johan Barstad, 'Lowland Crofting and Urban Sprawl: New Aspects to Sustainable Forest Management in Local and Rural Development', in Economic Sustainability of Small-Scale Forestry ed. by Anssi Niskanen and Johanna Väyrynen (Joensuu: European Forestry Institute, 2001), pp. 269-76.

²³ This is well set out in a Swedish context in: Susanne Hjort, and Gunnar Malmberg, 'The Attraction of the Rural: Characteristics of Rural Migrants in Sweden', Scottish Geographical Journal, 122 (2006), 55-75.

²⁴ Shucksmith and Fairlie, p.171

²⁵ Brand, Stewart. How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built. New York: Viking, 1994.

²⁶ Graham, G. et al, 'Designing for Survival, the President Introduces His Long Life/loose Fit/low Energy Study', RIBA Journal, 1972, 374-376

²⁷ Robert Dodgshon, 'West Highland and Hebridean Settlement Prior to Crofting and the Clearances: A Study into Stability or Change?', Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 123 (1993), 419-38.

²⁸ Dodgshon, p.422

²⁹ Arne Berg, Norske Garstun (Oslo: Institutt for sammenlignende kulturforskning, serie B Skrifter LV, 1968). This is the seminal work on the Norwegian vernacular, still widely cited in most works surveying issues of rural architecture.

³⁰ Solveig Egeland, and Linn Knudsen, På Tur I Listalandskapet (Farsund: Listalandskapet Nave Nortrail, 2005)